

00:00

(This is CD 1 of an interview with Joe Carpenter on August 23rd. Joe is a current employee for Wildlife Services. Can you give me a little bit about your educational background, Joe?)

High school.

(Where did you go to high school?)

I went to high school in Minnesota.

(Where was that?)

North of the Cities. It was—it's not there any more. It's, um, [pause] I guess it was a country school that, you know, didn't survive the sprawl, you might say.

(Was there a town nearby, a small town?)

[pause] Well, actually I haven't been there for over thirty years. It wasn't related to a town as such.

(OK. Where did you grow up?)

Um, in Minnesota. I was born in St. Cloud.

(And grew up in what area?)

In that, in that—well, north of the Cities, in the St. Cloud area.

(Did you grow up trapping and hunting and fishing?)

Yeah, I, I hunted all the time. [pause] And um, and I did quite a bit of fishing, too. I always enjoyed that.

01:48

(Did any family member or anyone close to you teach you how to do those things, particularly how to hunt or trap?)

[pause] Well, it's, it's, it's really somethin' that you kind of pick up on your own, really. And I like to hunt by myself, always have. Um, you just kind of work your way through whatever area you're hunting and, um [pause] that's kind of the main part of it, is to just stalk your way through an area and hunt it out. It's more a matter of doing it than being taught.

(Did you grow up trapping specifically any animals?)

I kind of was a latecomer on the trapping. I was out, out of school when I started that.

02:58

(And when did you start with Wildlife Services?)

In, uh, '92.

(And where was that?)

That was in Elko, Nevada.

(What did you do for them there?)

Was a specialist.

(Oh. And what kind of work did you do, like, what animals and that type of thing?)

Uh, it was mostly coyote and some mountain lion. It was open range country with range bands that were migratory. Um [pause] And there's a lot of coyotes and a lot of lions in that state, and they really were a problem.

03:49

(So those were the two things that you did the majority of work in?)

Yeah, almost all, was coyote and lion.

(Did you have to pack in or camp in to do the work?)

Yeah. It was actually very ideal for me. In Nevada we camped fifty weeks out of the year. That's pretty much still how they do things there. In the summer some of it was packing, but um [pause] they had a sheep camp that I wintered in, and I use a teepee tent a lot in the summertime.

(Was that your first job out of school?)

Well, no, I was a old guy by then.

(What did you do first, before you started with Wildlife Services?)

Well, I trapped and herded sheep for about twenty years.

04:44

(Oh. And then how'd you get on with Wildlife Services?)

Well, I begged for about five years till I finally got my start. Um, I had worked in the area enough that I had good references from the area folks, and um, I just eventually—well, I called the boss every month, every month for five years, and finally they gave me the job.

(What made you want to get on with Wildlife Services?)

Well, the things that I did were, were fading as far as making a living. I was, I was fortunate in that I was the right age for what they called the "fur boom," where I could make a living trapping without, um, being associated with any organization, so I, I was able to make a go at that. And

then I could work on, well, whatever else in the summer, be it ranch work or um, whatever I needed to fill in. But then when the boom, which, you know, came and went in twenty years, um, was done, then there wasn't really any other way, and I didn't really have much other in the line of skills. And it's what I wanted to do, and fortunately there was Wildlife Services, which gave me a way to do it.

06:16

(And you were in the Elko, Nevada area. And then where was your next place?)

I went to Sheridan, Montana. Um [pause] it was a little modified in terms of camping. I only camped in the summer. I went up in the mountains with the range bands, and um [pause] I did coyote line and then also bear work in Montana, which was a nice experience.

(You liked the bear work?)

Uh, it's a nice change, you know, just a little variety. It's, it's not overly challenging in that, in that that's all you would want to do, but I mean, there, again, when they're killing livestock, you have to remove the culprits, and uh, you know, it was a nice change of pace.

07:17

(What did you use to trap the bear?)

Uh, they have to use a foot snare that, that traps—the steel traps of the bear size were taken out of the field somewhere around 1970, I don't know exactly when. But they've, they've gone to foot snares with a long cable on 'em, is what they use now.

(So you never did the trapping with the foot snares for bear?)

Well, I did the foot snare but not—

(Or no, I'm sorry, not the foot trap.)

Not the leg hold.

(Leg hold trap.)

No, never used it. I think, I think they're still legal in the state of Maine, but I don't know that—anyway, Wildlife Services hasn't used 'em for maybe thirty years.

(And you were in Montana for several years?)

Six, six and a bit, I think, yeah.

(And it sounds like you enjoyed the work there.)

Yeah. It was—it was— [pause] it was a good, good stop. It—also, there's a huge difference between being a fur trapper and a Wildlife Services trapper, and, uh, it gave me a good chance to kind of work on my skills and upgrade my skills.

08:46

(As a Wild—?)

Yeah, as a specialist, as a Services guy.

(Because you had been trapping fur for income.)

Yeah, for twenty years. But Wildlife Services is, is [pause] a far cry from that. It's a whole other deal.

(How did you get here to North Dakota?)

Well, I applied. [laughs]

(And you wanted to leave Montana?)

Yeah, yeah, I—that was a simple matter of economics. Ground down there was \$8,000 an acre, and out here you could buy it for \$300, you know. And I still wasn't nestled in, you might say. So um, [pause] not having any, you know, any large means to spend, you know, eight, ten thousand dollars an acre, and, and the stuff that you, you know, that everybody, everybody wants would be, you know, the stream with the trees and all this. It's a question if you're Ted Turner you own it all, and if you're not, you know, you don't, so—nothin' against Ted, but I was just kind of very aware of what I had to do, and I, and I couldn't do it in Montana.

10:08

(What area do you work in in North Dakota here?)

Southwest.

(And, and do you have several counties?)

Yeah, I've got about seven—most of seven counties.

(In the southeast corner—or, southwest corner?)

Yeah.

(And when did you come to that area?)

Um, the end of '99, so I actually started really working in the early part of the year 2000, almost five years ago.

(And what work do you do there?)

Mostly coyotes, but a lotta—a lot of everything, I mean, anywhere from skunks to raccoons to bats to anything that's a thorn in somebody's side.

(That sounds very different than what you did in Montana.)

Yeah, yeah, it is. Um [pause] everything here is I would say more domestic, more, um, town-oriented, you might say, than you know—open range you're so far away from towns that it's not part of your, your reality. But here you're kind of—I don't know, do you call it urban-related? So I do the stuff for the stockmen and I do the stuff for the people in towns, too. So it's more diverse.

11:29

(Now, you did mountain lion work in both Nevada and Montana. Do you do any mountain lion work here?)

No. [chuckles] But I'm on call, you know. They, it's becoming more and more of an issue. [laughs] So it might eventually.

(So there are more sightings?)

Yeah, but it's mostly hysteria.

(Oh, really?)

11:57

Yeah. I can [pause] I can tell you a little story. I got a call two days ago from someone that their dog came home and its nose was bloodied and somebody came over and confirmed it as a mountain lion attack. And I, I told the person that if they fight with a house cat they get a bloody nose, and if they fight with a lion they're dead. So [pause] it's only hysteria at this point. I mean, there's nothing—I mean, these lions for some reason here don't kill anything and they don't eat anything and they don't leave any tracks, but yet people see them everywhere. So, um, at some point, you know, it may happen, but where I'm the only one with actual lion experience because of my out-of-state experience, then I would be the one that they would, um, call.

(So you haven't seen any tracks in your area?)

Oh, no. No. Lots of people have, but not me. (Noise in background) Want me to find that for you?

(Oh, I think it'll just do that every once in a while. I'm not sure what that is. [pause] Um, so are there—there are towns, obviously, in your area. Any sizeable communities? You do a lot of work in the little towns?)

Yeah, it's all little towns. It's all, well, Dickinson, I guess that's a bigger town, I do a little bit up there, but there's all the—Hedinger and Bowman and Mott and Regent and all those little pop stands throughout there.

13:32

(Have you done any work with the Research Center at all?)

No, not a bit.

(OK. [pause] Currently you do coyote, but skunks, bats—)

Badger.

(Badger, oh.)

Yeah, you name it. Anything that's just a pain in somebody's [pause] side, then they call me.

(Beaver?)

Oh, yeah, yeah. Lots of beaver.

14:04

(What do you like best about your work?)

Um [pause] the best thing about it is I can just go do it. There's, there's not somebody lookin' over, over my shoulder. I'm given the chance to either get the work done or not, and that's just great.

(And you had mentioned camping. You did a lot of that in your other states. Do you do any of that here?)

Yeah, yeah. It's a real asset. I, if somebody—or, when people have coyote problems, I camp in their area and listen to 'em howl at night. These coyotes vary state to state in being tight-lipped or not so, and these are a very tight-lipped variety here. You can't always make them howl, but when they are ready to, they will. And if I'm there, then, uh, I can pin them down.

(Do you do calling?)

Yeah.

15:15

(How'd, where'd you learn to do coyote calling?)

Well, there again, I just tried it one day, and it's, uh, a learning process. You just stay with what works and what doesn't work, you move on.

(And you use dogs in your work.)

Um huh.

( Describe that to me, what kind of dogs and how you use them.)

Well, they're kind of a hound dog. And [pause] I guess their nose is their best function. I'll, I'll never lose a cripple, or if the airplane is gonna work in the area and the coyotes are in the brush and the dogs run the coyotes out of the brush—

(So you usually use them just for coyotes?)

Yeah, but, they you know, they'll tree a lion, too.

(Oh.)

They'll tree a 'coon.

16:19

(Did you use 'em in Nevada and Montana, too?)

Yeah, yeah. I've always, always had the dogs.

(And do you do any aerial gunning?)

I used to, but doggone 'em, they have a full-time gunner now.

(Oh.)

It was, it was real valuable to a hunter to be able to hunt his own area with an aircraft, because then you'd really know what was goin' on, you know. CRP comes in and out of rotation, you know, 'cause the coyotes are gonna be in that CRP. Well, if they've been in there for years and all of a sudden it comes out, you don't know, see, they're gonna change their denning area. And you'll know where the sunflowers are and if they put a new road in, you know, or if there's, there's some oil development, next thing you know they've got a new road in here or there and you got access that you don't even know about if you don't get a chance to look things over. So, um, I do miss my aircraft time. But you know, I mean, it's still a good job. [chuckles] You can't win 'em all.

17:24

(You mentioned CRP. What's CRP?)

Conservation Reserve Program. They just put area aside and um, people can hunt it, but it's, it's not—they don't hay it, so, you know, if it grows up to your waist, then whatever is in there is home free, you know. Coyotes that are offending some sheep man will use that to their advantage.

(And so when you did aerial gunning in your area, of course, you were more familiar in some ways—)

Well, a lotta of ways. Even—like, a real good place to set a trap would be where a cow or an old bull or something has died, and you'd never know it in the rolling hills, but if you were up there in the aircraft, you can spot where, you know, somebody lost a bull, and then you can use that really to great benefit all winter long. But there again, you gotta see it. So there was a lot of things that you picked up when you were in the aircraft.

(In your territory.)

Yeah, yeah.

18:28

(And now you don't do that any more?)

No, no. They've, they've got a full-time gunner and they figure it's more for safety reasons than anything else, because, um, I guess they make a team that way. And then, um, if they're in the air, then I can use my ground, my dogs on the ground, which is an advantage, so you know, it's a give-and-take world, I guess.

(Did you do aerial gunning in Nevada and Montana, too?)

Yeah.

(Any close calls in the airplane?)

No. No.

(By the time you started to do this, I would assume they had radios and ground crew, and ?)

Well, they didn't always have ground crew, but they sure had the radios.

19:19

(You mentioned what you like best about your job, to be able to get the work done kind of on your own, it sounds like, somewhat. What do you like least?)

[pause 9 sec.] Oh, I don't have any complaints.

(Really?)

Yeah. No, I'm, I'm just very happy to be here.

(Good. What do you find the most challenging?)

Some, some of the coyotes.

(Really?)

Oh, yeah. They're very adaptable, very quick to learn.

(And so how to you make that—how do you meet that challenge?)

Well, they only know what they've been taught, so you've got to—you know, there's several, several skills that we have. So you've gotta start with something and see how they react and just, just persevere till you get them, you know. They've all got a weakness. And then of course the old classic line, in that I can make all the mistakes I want, but they can only make one. So you just persevere, make your way through it, work your way through it.

20:39

(Any other animal as challenging to you as the coyote?)

No, there wouldn't be.

(Really.)

Beaver can get awful tough. But the thing about beaver is, they're, they're in a smaller area. You know, you don't—the smaller the area, the more of a, you know, disadvantage it is to them. A fox can get very, very smart, but they don't cover the ground like a coyote does. So, uh, I think coyote's the toughest.

(Mountain lions?)

No.

(And bears, I've heard, are really pretty easy in some ways.)

Right. But there again, if you give 'em a chance to find a learning curve, they will. So—oh, in the earlier days, some of the sheep men used to offer their herders wine if they would catch the bear. A lot of times they would just educate the bear, so then you would have more of a challenge than if they'd not been tampered with. Which is the same situation with a coyote. I mean, they have such a fabulous learning curve that if you can be the first one there, then things are quicker.

(Mm-hmm. What has been a, um, difficult social or political situation that you've found yourself in?)

22:02

[pause 9 sec.] I don't think I've had one.

(Really? Most people that you work—like, the ranchers, you know, always want your help, I assume, a pretty cooperative type of thing?)

Well, they're all different. But you just know what you're there for and you know what you gotta do, and you do it and go on to the next one. Um, you just do the best you can, and if it, it isn't good enough, then I guess I'll be lookin' for a job. Um, But I'm just more concerned, I just, to do the best I can. But I can't please 'em all, but I try to.

(Can you think of a funny thing that's happened to you while you were capturing or handling animals?)

Well, I fall down a lot. But um [pause 4 sec.] I can't really.

([laughs] But you do have a falling-down thing, huh?)

Oh, it tends to happen. Yeah, I'll get going down a steep hill goin' too fast or (pause) somethin'. Yeah, yeah I've hit the ground more than once.

23:28

([laughs] Any scary things that've happened to you?)

[pause] I can't think of anything.

(Bear, lion?)

No.

(No? Not too many? And you've done some work, I know this is very different, but you've done some work with fox?)

Yeah, yeah. Both Montana and, and here. There weren't any in, uh, Nevada. And they can get smart, but they , but where they don't cover so much ground, they're not that bad.

(What's your favorite trap to use?)

Newhouse. Far and away.

(Really?)

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, they were fantastic.

(What do you like compared to the other ones?)

Well, they got strength in their jaws and [pause] they get a good, sure, positive hold, and they just don't let you down. They're just good, stable—they're just a great trap.

(Do you make any kind of modifications?)

Well, there's a lot of modifications within the industry. So you'd have to be specific with me. I don't like jaws to close. I like that 3/16 gap. What they call the, the thicker jaws, those are real good on what they call a "Texas special" on a #4 Newhouse. That's the, that's the—if you're talking about coyotes, if you give me what they call a Texas special, that's a real trap.

25:13

(So do you make the modifications or—?)

Oh, I have to, yeah.

(And that would be what you said, the trap?)

Yeah, I want an offset and I want thick jaws. And strong springs. But Newhouse have strong springs.

(Do you have a favorite lure recipe?)

No.

(Do you make your own or do you buy them?)

I mostly make it.

(Do you?)

Yeah.

(What do you do for coyote?)

Well, urine's hard to beat.

(Really?)

Yeah. Um [pause] I cut it out of them as much as I can. Good fresh urine is, is real good. It doesn't matter if it's a male or a female, either one.

(And is that usually the only ingredient for the lure for coyote?)

Well, it'll sure work. I—there again, too, coyotes react different. Some of 'em [pause] won't work a bait set and some of 'em, um, won't work a lure set. So you just gotta start somewhere. And um, urine is—you can't start any more pure than that, so that's where I start.

26:38

(And you start with that and see if that works?)

Well, yeah. What I have to be, I have to be in the area that they're using, so I've gotta find the area that they're going through, and then I like to use the urine sets.

(And what did you use for bear for lures?)

Well, the sheep that they kill is, is usually you would build a um (pause) not a cage, but you'd enclose it and then just put the snare in front of it.

(And put the animal—?)

—in the back of it.

(In the ?)

Yeah. 'Cause with the bears, the more maggoty and rotten they get, the more they like them. So you don't have to worry about fresh bait by any means. But they'll come back and feed on their kills. So you build a little cubby, that was the word, a cubby around a bait and set the front. Then when, you know, they're smart, then they'll dig it out from behind, so then you gotta put a snare behind, too, or they might work the backside. So there's some variability it there.

27:48

(So they might avoid the snare?)

Yeah. Yeah. If they've, if they've been worked on, they'll be wise to it.

(And what did you use for mountain lion?)

Dogs.

(Pardon?)

Dogs.

(Oh, but I mean for a lure.)

Never trapped 'em. Yeah. Just ran 'em up a tree.

(Treed? And then would shoot them?)

Right.

(Oh, so just use the dog?)

Mm-hmm.

28:13

(And you mentioned fox. Any specific lure for fox?)

Um, they really like mink and they really like skunk.

(Really?)

Yeah.

(They actual—explain that to me, what they like. Do you mean the scent or the animal?)

Yeah, yeah. You take the glands of either and they're attracted to that.

([pause]And how do you—how do you work with the beaver?)

Well, [pause] I set their houses and I set wherever they're leaving and, and entering the sides of the crick and, and then on the downside of the damn I set that, too.

(Live trap?)

No, Conibears mostly, and then again, some of 'em won't get in a Conibear, and uh, then you want to use a foothold. So actually it's gonna be faster to go in with both kinds of traps, because if they've been stung by one or the other, then they won't hit it for you. So when I go to set an

area up, then I like to set a variety of traps and then you can hopefully get out of there, um quickly rather than have to set it all up with Conibears and then you have one that's Conibear-smart and you can't get him so then you've gotta reset it with leg holds.

(So they sound a little tricky, kind of?)

Can be. And then, then again, once in a while you get one that's just downright double-tough.

(Really?)

Yeah.

(You've been doing this for how long?)

Well, I think thirteen years with Wildlife Services and then another twenty myself.

30:00

(How have your trapping techniques changed over the years?)

[pause] Well, you know, you know but you're always trying to learn. But then you have to keep mindful of not getting sloppy with the stuff you already know. It's, it's a matter of keeping everything sharp, having attention to detail all the time. Just don't ever think that you're really good and everything that walks by is gonna, you know, step in, in your trap. It's just a matter of um [pause] oh, just asking quality out of yourself all the time, more than [pause] you know, it's not magic. There's really not a new set that's gonna knock 'em dead. It's not like that. It's just more a matter of attention to detail and perseverance.

(I would assume that you—I was gonna ask, I would assume that some of the trapping techniques that you used when you started out, when you were trapping for a living, you still use?)

Yeah. Absolutely.

(What would those be?)

Well, there's only three really basic kind of sets that you can do, and that would be a dirt hole and then what they call a flat set or, or a simple set, and then you can do a trail set. And anything other than that is really only a variation of that. So I mean, that's all there is. It's just a matter of doing it really well and doing it, doing enough of it to accomplish what you're after.

31:46

(If you had a grandchild asking you about trapping secrets, your trapping secrets, what would you tell him or her?)

Whoever works the hardest catches the most.

(Really?)

Sure. [pause]

(So there's really no secret?)

No. Sweat.

(Really? [Laughs])

Sweat 'n shoe leather.

(Is it one of those things that you just learn the more you do?)

Absolutely. Yeah. And then you have to [pause] you know, if you, if you're, if you're not trying to learn, you're not going to. But if you've always got your eyes open, you're, you're going to. You just have to keep in mind that you don't really—you know, you're nothin' special, and that, um, you can learn every day.

(And probably learn from other people?)

Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot of, of real quality out there, and um (pause) um sure.

('Cause I would assume you've learned some techniques and things from other trappers?)

Well, I try to. [pause]

33:02

(What do you think that trapping and wildlife management will be like in twenty-five to fifty years?)

[chuckles] Well, [pause 6 sec.] I guess it could go one of two ways. It, can, the real unlikelihood of the anti's, if they get tired of the beaver cutting their trees down and um, damming up their roads, [pause] you know, people could be more open to it. But it doesn't tend to look that way. Um, people are further and further from square one, basic— um, um, [pause 8 sec.] I don't know. [pause 6 sec.] If—if they'll—I guess if they have enough problems, they get rabies from raccoons, then, you know, I mean—um. it's for real that, that animals have to be managed, but I don't know if people will be so far from, from wanting to look at that, um that trapping, management will be called for. I don't know.

(So it would be a concern that people get far enough away from the problems of the land that they wouldn't understand?)

Well, they're getting—it's probably radical groups now, but there's always people trying to shut everything down. [pause] And, um, [pause] they're more vocal and, um, trying to get involved in, in more things all the time. Ah, and they're pretty smart about how they do it, and they at, they seem to be pretty good about begging for money to get it done, so um, it's just a matter of, of enough people, you know, checking out reality, that those skunks are gonna give you rabies and could be a problem, or these deer, you know, are starving to death and it's an act of mercy to manage them. I guess it's up to the people. It's hard for me to tell which way they're gonna go.

35:31

(What have you seen in the last—well, you've had almost thirty years experience doing this kind of work. What have you seen to be big changes in trapping and wildlife management?)

Just more restrictions. [chuckles]

(Really?)

Yeah, yeah, both from anti-groups and [pause] some of the restrictions by Game and Fish are getting tighter on the fur trapper, so it's not getting any easier.

(What do you see as the biggest challenges facing people who do your work?)

Well, you just have to keep in mind that you have this job because you want it, and even though there's gonna be some restrictions that you don't like, you just forget about it and do what you can do, do it to the best of your ability, and go on with it.

(So do what you can in the face of increasing restrictions, basically?)

Yeah., yeah, I mean, you just have to [pause] live with, live with what you got. [pause] You know, there's the [pause] young guy comin' in wouldn't have seen the changes that I have, so it might be easier on him. But then, um, you know, as you get older you see the changes, but then you're not gonna be here forever either, so I suppose it balances out.

37:19

(Because they'll be changes after you go?)

Oh, yeah.

([pause] What other interests or hobbies do you have?)

None, really. Yeah, I um, it's, it's pretty much what I do, it's my main interest in my life. My work is, is my life, pretty much.

(Anything else you'd like to add? Anything you've thought about while we were talking that you'd like to add?)

No. I'd just like to say hi to all my Wildlife Services friends out there.

([laughs] And you like your work?)

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I, I look forward to goin' to work every day.

(Oh, good! In the thirteen years since you've been working, have you seen some of the issues change in terms of when you do your work, the whole idea of comp or credit time and how long you work for hours in a day or hours in a week? Have you seen that change?)

I never paid attention to it in the first place.

(Really?)

No. [pause] [chuckles] In fact, the idea of [pause] a five-day work week, 8 to 5, that's—I don't know, don't know anything about it. [chuckles]

(So you work six days a week?)

Oh, yeah, um, yeah. You know, 8 o'clock means nothing to the animals. If I started at 8 and quit at 5, I wouldn't be here. So I never even thought about that.

(So no other comments? [pause] OK. And I have no other questions. So we will just conclude this CD for Joe Carpenter.)

39:16 End of interview.